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Balibo

Country of Origin: Australia

Production Company: Balibo Films

Director: Robert Connolly

Producers: John Maynard, Rebecca Williamson

Screenwriters: David Williamson, Robert Connolly, based on the book *Cover Up* by Jill Jolliffe

Cinematographer: Tristan Milani

Production Designer: Robert Cousins

Editor: Nick Meyers

Genre: Political Thriller

Duration: 111 minutes

Cast: Anthony LaPaglia, Oscar Isaac, Damon Gameau, Thomas Wright, Mark Leonard Winter, Gyton Grantley, Nathan Phillips, Bea Viegas, Anamaria Barreto, Simon Stone, José da Costa

Year: 2009

Synopsis

In present day East Timor, Juliana (Bea Viegas) travels from a remote mountain village to Dili to be interviewed by the East Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation about the Indonesian invasion of October-December 1975 and the subsequent twenty-four year occupation. In Darwin in 1975, East Timorese Secretary of Foreign Affairs, José Ramos-Horta (Oscar Isaacs) offers the job of head of the East Timor news agency to veteran journalist Roger East (Anthony LaPaglia). Initially reluctant, East takes up the offer in order to investigate the fate of five missing Australian television journalists, who are believed to have been killed by Indonesian troops. East's quest is intercut with the story of the missing journalists: Channel 9 reporter Malcolm Rennie (Nathan Phillips) and cameraman Brian Peters (Thomas Wright), and reporter Greg Shackleton (Damon Gameau), cameraman Gary Cunningham (Gyton Grantley), and soundman Tony Stewart (Mark Leonard Winter) from Channel 7 in Melbourne. With Horta and later resistance fighter Sabika (José da Costa) as his guides, East retraces the journalists' journey to the area around the small town of Balibo on the border of the Indonesian territory of West Timor. Early on the morning of October 16, 1975, the five journalists film Indonesian troops dressed in plain clothes, crossing the border into East Timor. The journalists are chased by the troops and hole up in a house in Balibo. Peters goes to speak with the troops, repeatedly saying that they are Australian journalists. The Indonesian commander shoots him in the head. The other journalists are executed, and their bodies are burned along with their equipment and film. Some time later, Roger East is led to Balibo at night and sees evidence of the murders. He returns to Dili, where Horta introduces him to three men who witnessed the killings. With the Indonesian invasion of the city imminent, Horta leaves Dili to act as the voice of Timor outside the country. He urges East to join him, but the journalist refuses. East files the story of the deaths of the journalists. On December 7, 1975, Indonesian forces invade Dili. The news agency is ransacked. East is pistol-whipped and dragged to the pier where, along with hundreds of Timorese, he is executed. Eight-year-old Juliana (Anamaria Barreto) witnesses his death. In the present day, the interviewer asks if Juliana can return the next day to continue her story. Choking back tears, she replies 'I have twenty-four years of stories. How long will that take you to record?' Onscreen titles note that over 8000 Timorese came forward to tell their stories of life under Indonesian rule, during which time as many as 183,000 Timorese were killed. Documentary news footage shows Horta representing Timor at the United Nations, eventually returning to his country in 1999. An onscreen title states that 'The killers of Roger East and the Balibo Five are yet to be brought to justice'.

Critique

Balibo is not only a film about the deaths of six Australian journalists and a decades-long official cover-up, it is also a story about a pivotal event in the history of East Timor, as well as a reflection on the history of the often fraught relationship between Australia and Indonesia. The geo-political context for the film is complex and not particularly well understood, hence the frequent use of onscreen titles or cards to provide critical background information. The 'Carnation Revolution' and the fall of the fascist dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 ended 400 years of colonial rule of Portuguese Timor (now East Timor, or Timor Leste). Indonesia, with the backing of the United States and Australia, began a campaign to destabilise the country and foment civil war. The group of Australian journalists later dubbed the Balibo Five were reporting on these covert Indonesian operations when they were killed in October 1975. The invasion of the capital, Dili, on December 7, 1975, inaugurated twenty-four years of Indonesian rule.

The deaths of the Balibo Five were widely reported at the time; the execution of Roger East on 8 December was less well known. Successive Australian and Indonesian governments claimed for many years that the Balibo Five had been killed in crossfire between Indonesian troops and fighters loyal to the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, FRETILIN. In 2007, a New South Wales coronial inquest into the death of cameraman Brian Peters concluded that there was strong evidence that the killings had been ordered by the overall commander of the Indonesian forces, and that the first shot had been fired by Yunus Yosfiah, later commander of the Indonesian military and Minister of Information under President Habibie (1998-99). In 2009, the year in which the film *Balibo* was released, the Australian Federal Police commenced a war crimes inquiry. Despite the testimony of a former Indonesian officer who came forward in 2009 to claim that the journalists had indeed been executed, the Indonesian government has been reluctant to assist the inquiry. *Balibo* was banned in Indonesia shortly before it was due to be screened at the 2009 Jakarta International Film Festival.

Balibo is a powerful and deeply moving film about a series of events that continue to resonate and, shockingly, remain unresolved. While several scenes and conversations are necessarily speculative, the filmmakers drew on testimonies collected by the East Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, and evidence presented to the 2007 coronial inquest into the death of Brian Peters, as well as extensive interviews and conversations with the men's families, friends and colleagues. The film mixes actual footage shot by the ill-fated journalists and other historical documentary film with painstaking recreations of their reports and other key scenes, many of which were shot in the original locations. Several of the Timorese cast members had personal experience of the events depicted in the film which weaves together three stories: that of Juliana, who stands in for the people of East Timor; the last days of the Balibo Five; and Roger East's investigation of their deaths that leads to his own unfortunate demise. The scenes featuring the five young journalists were shot with 16mm lenses and film stock similar to that which would have been used at the time so that they resemble 1970s news reports. The look of these scenes both enhances the impression of historical fidelity, and helps to differentiate them from the other interwoven story strands. It is a testament to the talents and storytelling abilities of director Robert Connolly, cinematographer Tristan Milani, and editor Nick Meyers, that the complex structure, requiring constant intercutting between the three stories, never becomes confusing or alienating.

Along with the emotionally charged scenes in which the six journalists are murdered, one brief scene in the film carries particular dramatic weight. Reaching Balibo at night after a journey fraught with danger at every turn, Roger East is taken to the house in which several of the Balibo five were killed. The beam of his torch picks out blood spatters on the walls and floor. The film cuts to the moments after the killings, when the journalists' bodies and equipment were piled up and burnt, then cuts back to East's story. His guide, Komandante Sabika (José da Costa), picks up a handful of ashes from the middle of the room and pours them in to East's outstretched palm. This symbolic gesture recalls the celebrated moment in the Northern Territory in August 1975 when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured a handful of earth into the hand of Indigenous elder, Vincent Lingiari, to symbolise the return of the land to its traditional owners. This is a pivotal moment in

the history of the struggle for Indigenous land rights in Australia, and one for which Whitlam received enormous praise. The equivalent scene in *Balibo* silently damns Whitlam, the Prime Minister at the time of the journalists' deaths; his government's failure to make an official protest to the Indonesians over the Balibo incident sealed Roger East's own fate, as the Indonesian military took this as a sign that the Australian government placed greater weight on maintaining good relations with Indonesia than on the lives of its journalists and citizens.

Ben Goldsmith